# The French Election Marks: The End Of France's Traditional Parties

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For the first time in more than 60 years, the republic's top presidential candidates don't belong to either of the major parties.

PARIS — After an unprecedented electoral campaign characterized by multiple political upheavals, the first round of France's presidential elections has confirmed that the republic is in the midst of a radical renewal.

While this is nothing new — turmoil has rocked French political life for many months now — Sunday's vote has underscored the crisis of democracy and political establishment this nation and others are witnessing in the face of populism and globalization. This is the only instance in more than six decades that France has seen a candidate for president in the runoff who ultimately rejects the traditional parties of the left and right. Thus, whoever wins the runoff in May, whether centrist Emmanuel Macron or far-right Marine Le Pen, will have a tricky job ahead of them as they seek to embrace a festering rebellion and push through new policies.

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In the fall of 2016, the shift began to take shape with surprising primary election results of mainstream parties. Les Républicains saw the elimination of Nicolas Sarkozy, the former French president, as well as Alain Juppé, prime minister under former French President Jacques Chirac. In December of the same year, François Hollande, the outgoing president, decided not to run for re-election because of his dismal approval ratings. In January 2017, Manuel Valls, the former prime minister, was eliminated in the Socialist Party's primary elections. Voters continued with unabated determination to shake the oldest and most entrenched political establishments to their core, eroding the traditional parties in the process.

Now, for the first time in this current governmental system, neither one of the large parties of the right and left, which have shaped France's political life for over 60 years, is represented in the runoff elections for the presidency. Benoît Hamon, the candidate for the ruling Socialist Party, garnered just above a mere 6 percent of the votes cast, and François Fillon, the candidate of Les Républicains, only got approximately 20 percent. Only an average of about one out of four voters supported one of the two major powers that have historically driven politics in recent years.


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French presidential candidate for the “En Marche!” movement Emmanuel Macron celebrates after the first round of the presidential election.

The two candidates who came out on top of the first round and who will face off again in two weeks, have clearly indicated that they do not wish to be part of the old left-right paradigm. Emmanuel Macron, who obtained close to 24 percent of the votes, calls himself a centrist and a year ago created a new type of movement called “En Marche!” — which roughly translates to “Onward!” — that claims to attract supporters from both the right and the left and also from civil society. Marine Le Pen, who garnered close to 22 percent of the votes, also rejects the old left-right dichotomy and intends to play on the opposition between “patriots” and “globalists.”

This shift in France is therefore historic because the forces of an open society and those of a society where the focus is on national identity are opposing each other in a way this country is not used to. But it’s also a pattern not unlike what the world is witnessing elsewhere. In Great Britain with Brexit and the United States with the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, an increasing number of nations are experiencing a profound crisis in their established political order and discovering the power of opposing forces when confronting issues such as globalization, a united Europe or even borders. This new dualism on the electoral landscape stems from a social gap between the upper and middle classes on the one hand, and the working class on the other.

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And we saw it here on Sunday. In the first round of France’s election, 33 percent of white-collar workers voted for Emmanuel Macron, while 37 percent of blue-collar workers chose Marine Le Pen, according to an Ipsos poll. Additionally, 27 percent of voters who claimed to work in a profession that is thriving voted for Macron, whereas 30 percent of those who felt that they practice a profession in decline chose Le Pen. Further, about 32 percent of those who said they can easily make ends meet

with their household income voted for Macron, while 43 percent of those who said they do so with difficulty chose Le Pen. The fight in France is therefore both political and social.

Currently, Emmanuel Macron appears to have the better odds in the runoff election. As early results poured in for round one, polls showed that 62 percent of voters had indicated their intention to vote for Macron next time, while only 38 percent seemed to favor Le Pen. However, the far-right leader, whose anti-immigrant platform continues to frighten a number of French voters, scored 20 points more than her father — National Front co-founder Jean-Marie Le Pen — did in the runoff presidential elections of 2002, when he took 18 percent. It is worth noting then that nationalist protests have made great strides in the past 15 years and may continue to prove significant in French political life — even if Le Pen loses.

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Even if Le Pen falls short, the impact of her run is historic.

If Macron wins the presidency next month, he will have to face two additional challenges. He must overcome a strong radical leftist movement centered around Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a candidate who won about 19 percent of the votes. And he must amass a majority in the upcoming parliamentary elections in June without which the new French president will not be able to push through economic and social reforms.

As he solidified his spot in the final two, Emmanuel Macron declared his intention “to break completely with a system that has been incapable of dealing with [French] problems for more than 30 years.” He certainly has the ambition, but he will need to acquire the political means if he is to make this ambition a reality. The task will not be an easy one.

*This piece has been translated from French by Bill Weber and edited for clarity.*